Engaging Sharp-Leadenhall: An Interdisciplinary Faculty Collaboration in Service-Learning

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This article reports on an interdisciplinary collaboration in the context of service-learning. Faculty members from the disciplines of family studies, anthropology, and media production worked collaboratively to develop and implement service-learning projects involving their classes and Sharp-Leadenhall, one of the oldest historically African-American communities in Baltimore City, Maryland. The authors argue that collaborative, interdisciplinary service-learning can respond to complex, real-world problems more fully than can be achieved through single-course, single-discipline service-learning. Additionally, this approach to service-learning provides faculty an opportunity to model interdisciplinary inquiry for students.

Higher education faculty commonly work independently and autonomously. In classrooms, faculty work with students, but without colleagues; in research, faculty often work alone. While interdisciplinary service-learning experiences have gained ground in recent years, little is known about the experiences of faculty attempting to pursue interdisciplinary service-learning endeavors. This article describes collaborative, interdisciplinary service-learning and examines the process, goals, and outcomes of one such collaboration in order to stimulate further practice and research of interdisciplinary collaboration in service-learning.

Interdisciplinary Collaboration

Much of the literature on interdisciplinary collaboration is focused on interdisciplinary research. Aboelela et al. (2007) conducted a systematic review of literature defining interdisciplinary research and identified several key components to these definitions. Based upon their review, they proposed and field tested the following definition of interdisciplinary research:

Interdisciplinary research is any study or group of studies undertaken by scholars from two or more distinct scientific disciplines. The research is based upon a conceptual model that links or integrates theoretical frameworks from those disciplines, uses study design and methodology that is not limited to one field, and requires the use of perspectives and skills of the involved disciplines throughout multiple phases of the research process. (p. 341)

Further, some authors have attempted to define the term interdisciplinary collaboration. Amey and Brown (2000), in the context of work to define community-university partnerships, described interdisciplinary collaboration as:

…integrative thinking where new knowledge is created from the merging of interdisciplinary perspectives. Members of the interdisciplinary collaboration feel ownership for the team, its direction, decision making, and feel accountability to each other. Participants in an interdisciplinary collaboration are motivated by the collegial discourse and learning opportunities leading to the creation of new knowledge. (p. 3)

Maglaughlin and Sonnenwald (2005), writing from the perspective of interdisciplinary research collaboration in the natural sciences, noted that interdisciplinary collaboration is required for addressing complex problems which no one discipline can adequately address.

In Melin's (2000) study of research collaboration at the individual level, which included data from surveys and interviews, researchers identified increased knowledge, better quality research, generation of new ideas, and expanded networks for future work as the main benefits of collaboration. Kluth and Straut (2003), interested in collaborative teaching, suggested that one benefit of collaboration is the opportunity to model collaboration for students. In an account of their own scholarly collaboration, Inch and McVarnish (2003) concluded that collaboration led to new appreciation of content knowledge and new perspectives on and approaches to pedagogy.

Challenges to interdisciplinary collaboration are also identified in the literature. For example, Maton, Perkins, and Saegert (2006) reviewed challenges to interdisciplinary community research, including the distinct cultures of different disciplines, the resources required for effective collaboration, and uncertainty about how interdisciplinary collaboration fits into universities' promotion and tenure processes. They suggested that promotion and tenure committees may look unfavorably upon co-authored publications, for example, where the candidate for promotion or tenure does not

hold first-author status. It is more difficult to carve out and quantify one individual's contribution to a group effort, they proposed, and promotion and tenure decisions are made for individuals, not groups.

The Partnership

Description of the Faculty Partners

This interdisciplinary collaboration took place within the context of Towson University, a large metropolitan university in Baltimore County, Maryland. The university has a metropolitan focus and actively promotes service and engagement activities among faculty and students. The institution has been on the President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll a number of times and has received the Community Engagement classification by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. It is a university that purports to value excellence in teaching, scholarship, and service, and the institution expects its faculty to negotiate a balance of these three activities. Service and interdisciplinary activities are appreciated, but support for such activities is limited, as are rewards. An expectation that innovative methods will be disseminated through publication exists, and promotion and tenure is based largely on faculty scholarship.

The partnership involved faculty from three distinct disciplines with unique interests and perspectives on urban families and communities: Elsa Lankford's disciplinary perspective (electronic media and film) focuses on documenting and celebrating urban life; Matthew Durington's disciplinary perspective (sociology) emphasizes analyzing and making meaning of urban life; and Audrey Falk's disciplinary perspective (family studies and community development) centers on strengthening families and communities. We considered our collaboration to be interdisciplinary in that we used methodologies and approaches from each of our disciplines to approach problems and opportunities within a shared community. All three faculty members brought a comprehensive approach to the project, both in terms of production training and varied social science methodologies, making for a robust curriculum and research design.

Evolution of the Project

Consonant with the literature on faculty collaboration (Hara, Solomon, Kim, & Sonnenwald, 2002; Inch & McVarnish, 2003; Maglaughlin & Sonnenwald, 2005; Melin, 2000), we found *compatibility* to be an important building block for our work. Inch and McVarnish (2003), in their reflections about using professional dialogue outside of the classroom to impact what happens in the classroom, contended that interdisciplinary

collaboration begin with a good match, which, they suggested, involves friendship and respect. Melin (2000) wrote that those interviewed for his study spoke about "personal chemistry, respect, trust, and joy" (p. 36). This collaboration began through three faculty members who had some connections with one another, common interests, and regard for one another. We liked and trusted each other and our relationships grew over the course of our collaboration.

While we approached the project from three distinct disciplines, each of us shared a commitment to service-learning and civic engagement in Baltimore City. Each of us taught courses with service-learning compo-nents. Lankford and Falk had come to know one another through their involvement in a yearlong service-learning faculty fellowship. Lankford and Durington had fostered a working relationship through efforts to link their respective departments in the formation of a media anthropology combined major and through other service work on campus and in the Baltimore region.

We decided to find a way to link our courses, interests, and expertise. Durington had an established relationship with the community of Sharp-Leadenhall through his research initiative, the Towson Metropoli-tan Ethnography Project. He suggested that Falk and Lankford work with him in this community. The three of us applied for a teaching innovation grant from Towson University in the spring of 2009, and we were awarded the grant for the following academic year to support our interdisciplinary project.

The Courses

Three courses were involved in this project: Falk's course entitled Community Services for Families; Lankford's Audio Documentary; and Durington's course, Life in the City. By design and good fortune, there was some overlap in the times when Falk and Lankford's classes were scheduled.

Community Services for Families is a required course for under-graduate students majoring in family studies. It is typically taken during the semester prior to students' first internship experience. This course engages students in team-based service-learning projects in the community through which students are each required to provide a minimum of fifty service hours. Audio Documentary is a creative and technical production class for which students are required to produce in-depth, non-fiction, audio work in the style of National Public Radio documentaries. The course content focuses on audio production and technical skills for audio documentaries, with some of the projects dedicated to aspects of life in

Baltimore City. Life in the City is an upper level anthropology course that serves as a capstone course for anthropology majors. It focuses on urban anthropology and ethnography and involves extensive individual fieldwork. Students are also required to produce research papers that combine their fieldwork with theory and applied methods from anthropology.

While each course was taught separately, the classes combined for different seminars over the course of the semester and students were allowed to collaborate and work together through various methodological exercises with community participants.

The Community

The overall project was born from a long-standing and continually developing relationship between the community of Sharp-Leadenhall and Towson University. Sharp-Leadenhall is a historically African-American community in Baltimore City. Gentrification has been a key challenge for this urban community, leading to tensions, across racial and socioeconomic lines, between long-time and newly established residents. Displacement of long-time residents over the decades due to highway construction projects has created resentment and has directly undercut residents' attempts to preserve the culture and dignity of this historic community. This is a neighborhood that is impoverished and has suffered from multiple iterations of urban development processes that have decreased the size of the community population over time.

As part of the metropolitan mission of the university, Durington had embarked upon a research collaboration with various members of the community, working through a series of sequential fieldwork projects starting in 2006. While this work initially started solely with members of the Sharp-Leadenhall Planning Committee, a series of network formations and snowball sampling began to involve dozens of community members in this small South Baltimore neighborhood through life-history interviews, participant observation, and collaborative media production. These research projects then evolved into service-learning and community engagement endeavors involving students – for instance, the creation of a concession stand operation to garner funds for after-school programming for youth in the neighborhood. This latter project saw an explosion of connections between students and community members as they worked side by side in volunteer capacities that then expanded to research collaborations. The most successful of these was a collaborative photography project between Towson University students and youth in the community. By the time the research project detailed here was implemented, the relationship between a large number of community members, students, and faculty was well developed, which supported its successful implementa-

tion. This was the latest iteration of projects formed by the dual input of community members and researchers in a reciprocal fashion.

Project Goals

We hoped that this collaboration would yield unique benefits for our partnering community. Specific, immediate goals were to provide the community with an analysis of employment needs to help the community better advocate for and support residents, and to provide audio documentaries and videotaped life histories for marketing and archival purposes.

We also hoped to model interdisciplinary collaboration for our students. We wanted our students to see that we valued collaboration and each other, and that collaboration can be done, despite its inherent challenges. Teamwork skills are critical for young people to develop and highly valued by employers. Teamwork is emphasized in Falk's Community Services for Families course where students' service-learning activities are all team-based and several of the course deliverables are completed by these same teams. Teamwork is also emphasized in both Durington's Life in the City course and in Lankford's Audio Documentary course. While anthropological research tends to be conducted by the lone anthropologist in the field, methods that require teamwork such as surveys, group interviews, and archival research were created with task-oriented designs that required students to work individually but combine their efforts for execution in the field. And, despite the *auteur* notion often attached to all media production, any output requires a team-based approach in order to execute recording, sound design, and post-production.

Furthermore, we believed that students would benefit from their service experience and from exposure to other faculty, other students, other disciplines, and our partnering community. We hoped that this experience would challenge students' conceptions of city life. Undergraduate students at Towson University are typically from suburban areas of Maryland and may have negative conceptions of Baltimore based on media representations of the city. Through their service-learning activities, we hoped students would develop a more nuanced understanding of the challenges faced by urban families and communities. We hoped that they would begin to confront their prejudices through interacting with members of the Sharp-Leadenhall community and engaging in reflective activities in class such as journal writing and role plays.

As faculty, we looked forward to working with one another on this project and learning from one another. We hoped that this partnership would lead to opportunities for collaborative scholarship in the form of peer-reviewed presentations and publications. We anticipated that this

interdisciplinary partnership would return insights about the promise and challenges of such collaboration that would be valuable for engaged practitioners and researchers alike.

How We Collaborated

Shared service site. Although sharing a service site may seem trivial, our sense is that interdisciplinary, coordinated sharing of a service-learning site is rare. More frequently, different faculty and departments are fending for themselves, trying to establish relationships with prospective sites. One community or organization may work with multiple faculty or departments from a university but not in a coordinated way. From the community perspective, universities may appear rather disjointed and disorganized.

Interconnected service-learning projects. As part of this project, a team of students enrolled in Community Services for Families in the fall and then again in the spring conducted their service-learning project in Sharp-Leadenhall under the guidance of Betty Bland-Thomas, the President of the Sharp-Leadenhall Planning Committee. Their project was a community-wide survey of resident needs for employment. Much of students' time during the fall semester was spent getting to know the community, developing trusting relationships with residents, and identifying community interests and needs. The students developed the idea and plan for the employment survey with residents. Several drafts of the survey were vetted by the Planning Committee, and a version of the survey was piloted late in the fall semester. Students engaged in this project in the spring went door-to-door in the neighborhood to have residents complete the final survey, and they also compiled the results for the community.

Lankford's Audio Documentary class conducted research on Sharp-Leadenhall and then visited the community as a class. As part of this site visit, the class interviewed four residents of Sharp-Leadenhall. The interviews were arranged by Lankford and Bland-Thomas. Class time was dedicated to transcribing and then editing these interviews into a single, five-minute audio documentary. The interviews were then analyzed and coded by students in Durington's anthropology course and served as critical data for students' ethnographic research papers.

Students from Durington's Life in the City class also continued work first started in 2006 in the community by former anthropology majors enrolled in two prior iterations of the course. These projects included the collection of life histories, as well as participant observation with community residents and surrounding stakeholders regarding housing issues and the dilemmas surrounding the impending construction of a slots gambling

facility adjacent to the community.

Shared knowledge and expertise. Since Durington was the primary expert on the Sharp-Leadenhall community, for one of the first days of class, Falk and Lankford's students met together and Durington spoke with them about the community history and current needs. Community activist Bland-Thomas was a guest speaker for all three courses. Durington also served as a secondary site supervisor for Falk's students.

Shared resources. Media resources were shared primarily by Durington and Lankford's classes, although resources such as flip-cameras were also made available to Falk's class. An audio recorder was purchased through the grant solely for use in Sharp-Leadenhall audio documentaries, giving students in the Audio Documentary class the ability to have equipment for longer periods of time to create more in-depth works than typically possible for students. There was also one shared website that specifically pertained to Sharp-Leadenhall activities for all three courses, which was maintained by a graduate assistant, paid through the teaching innovation grant, and under the direction of Durington.

Outcomes of Interdisciplinary Faculty Collaboration

Student Outcomes

Each of the three faculty members found the Sharp-Leadenhall community partnership to be an appropriate match for our classes in terms of learning outcomes for students. Students in Community Services for Families were able to plan and implement a project – in this case, a community-wide survey of residents' employment status and needs. Through this process they also gained skills in community-building, developing trusting relationships with residents, and analyzing data and assessing needs. The experience served as an excellent stepping stone toward students' internships, in which they would be required to work independently in community organizations. Most of all, it was a highly positive experience for the students, leaving them feeling proud, accomplished, welcomed, and committed to community work. In their final report, the fall student group wrote:

> The night of October 22nd we became a part of our first Sharp-Leadenhall community meeting. During the meeting we presented our reasons for being in the community and what our intentions were. We never expected what was going to happen next. On our way out of the door the meeting leader for that night mentioned how appreciative she and the rest of the members were for our presence and staying with them the amount of hours we had that

day. After her mini speech she and the rest of the senior citizen committee gave us a round of applause and hugs to show us their appreciation.

Durington's students appreciated the opportunity to combine methods training and other perspectives garnered through coursework in the anthropology major toward an engaged fieldwork project in Baltimore City. The project provided rich methodical training in visual anthropology guided by an ethos of participatory research.

Students in Lankford's class learned and applied the skills to create a professional audio documentary suitable for broadcast about a topic that they invested in through site visits, guest speakers, and research. Beyond the tangible product of the audio documentary, they were able to meet and talk with residents and experience a real city neighborhood, and to understand the complex issues surrounding gentrification of urban neighborhoods.

For all three classes, reflective discussions at the beginning of the semester and following completion of the project indicated a positive change in students' attitudes toward this urban neighborhood. Despite close proximity to Baltimore City, students in the three courses tended to associate Baltimore City with the award-winning television drama, *The Wire*. Students were able to form more realistic and complex understandings of city life. One student in the Community Services for Families course observed:

> I never thought I would actually become as attached to this place as I have this semester. I started out just thinking here goes another project that has to be done and now I'm leaving thinking I'm going to miss this. I do plan on coming back and staying in touch.

Community Outcomes

The Sharp-Leadenhall community benefitted in multiple tangible ways from this initiative. One tangible outcome to the community is the life histories created by Durington's students. Community members have experienced a growing recognition of their stake in the community evidenced by a growing archive of testimonials about their lives there both in the past and at present. The documentary produced by Lankford's students was uploaded to the Internet so that it would be available to the community and to others interested in Sharp-Leadenhall. For maximum exposure, the work was uploaded to Public Radio eXchange where it can be both listened to online and licensed by local public radio stations. A broad audience can hear the student work and learn about the concerns of residents in this

community. Finally, the data on community members' employment needs gathered by Falk's students is available to the community for advocacy purposes. According to Bland-Thomas, the data has been helpful in securing employment for residents by businesses with a local presence.

In addition to these tangible research outcomes stands the larger reciprocal impact that these types of activities have had among university faculty, students, and community members. Too often urban residents suffer the same fate as many other research collaborators who see intense interest by researchers while they are doing their respective projects only to never see them after the completion of it. While the faculty members get publications and students get grades on their projects, community collaborators are left wondering how they benefit from the experience. As detailed above, providing tangible products despite their size or substance is crucial to demonstrate a working partnership. The consistent presence of Towson University faculty and students before and since this iteration of the project in Sharp-Leadenhall has continued to lead to other projects including the recent awarding of a National Science Foundation Research Experience for Undergraduates that allows the hiring of community members for their expertise. Thus, collaborators are recognized as experts for what may simply appear as life narratives for them, but are realized as data for researchers. More importantly, it is the continued presence of faculty and students in various capacities that is the most meaningful for all parties involved.

This work has continued to produce larger research questions that are based on interests of community members such as finding ways to provide green spaces within the neighborhood and addressing the lack of employment within the city. Workshops led by faculty members in consultation with social service sector groups that deal with these issues have continued since the iteration of the project detailed in this article. In addition, the changing nature of gentrification brought on by the economic recession and its impact on the housing market has dramatically changed the income of potential incoming residents and escalating prices in the rental market. Durington has been able to work with residents to address these issues in various workshops as well. And, last, many of these changes have now spurred the idea for the creation of a community development corporation to create mixed income housing in the community. Each of these continuing research endeavors exposes students to larger "real world" dilemmas as they assist faculty while simultaneously expanding the nature of the project.

Faculty Outcomes

The three faculty engaged in this collaboration were positively impacted by the experience. We came to have a better appreciation of one

another's disciplines. We observed one another in formal teaching and informal communication with students and learned from each other's approaches. For example, Falk has encouraged her students to experiment with media approaches in their service-learning and has used the lens of ethnography to conceptualize the work that she and her students do in the community. Lankford believes that she is able to provide better instruction to her students through their ongoing access to dedicated media equipment purchased through the teaching innovation grant. With fewer limitations on student access to media equipment, Lankford is able to support her students in future semesters to create more in-depth work and to have more personal engagement with the community. Durington's teaching of visual anthropology is, he believes, deeply enhanced through his ongoing partnership with the Sharp-Leadenhall community. Collectively and individually, we have been able to build upon our experience in Sharp-Leadenhall in our scholarship.

Implications for Interdiscplinary Collaboration in Service-Learning

While there is a sizable literature on interdisciplinary collaboration in the areas of research and teaching, there is less literature focused on interdisciplinary collaboration in service-learning, and our work attempts to begin to fill that gap. Toward that end, the focus of the following discussion is on conceptualizing interdisciplinary faculty collaboration within the context of service-learning.

We view interdisciplinary faculty collaboration in the context of service-learning as two or more faculty representing two or more disciplines engaging in service-learning activities in the community with their students. The primary benefits of such collaboration, above and beyond the typical benefits of service-learning, are to more substantially approach the complexity of the real-world problems that service-learning aims to address and to model interdisciplinary collaboration for students. Such collaborative efforts may also lead to collaborative teaching and/or collaborative scholarship.

While the challenges of modeling interdisciplinary collaboration for students and faculty can be difficult, the rewards both for student experience and for generating data and scholarship for faculty are bountiful. In our experience, students appreciated the opportunity to make connections with additional faculty and students, to be a part of a large and multifaceted project, and to build upon one another's work. In addition, the three faculty involved were able to utilize both research methods and production techniques heretofore not utilized by them in other research designs. Since that time, all three faculty members have continued to utilize these varied

methods and production techniques in their subsequent courses and curriculum designs, particularly the utilization of a needs-assessment approach to begin a collaborative research process with community stakeholders. However, we also recognize the potential for even stronger interdisciplinary service-learning collaboration under the right conditions. For example, it would have been ideal if all three courses could have been taught at exactly the same time to allow for more joint class sessions.

Institutions of higher education can best support initiatives such as the one described here through professional development grants and other mechanisms that offer faculty the opportunity to plan their courses in concert with one another. Finding the time to meet with one another as faculty over the course of the semester can be a daunting challenge. Several authors have noted the importance of both time (Maglaughlin, 2005; Oberg, 2009) and communication (Amey & Brown, 2000; Hara, Solomon, Kim, & Sonnenwald, 2002; Jeffrey, 2003; Maglaughlin & Sonnenwald, 2005) in developing effective interdisciplinary collaboration initiatives. Kluth and Straut (2003) suggested that colleges and universities need to find ways to reduce institutional barriers to collaboration through such means as reconceptualizing faculty workload to incorporate time for collaborative work.

Similarly, the capacity to purchase supplies and resources that can support the courses is an incentive for faculty to attempt collaborative service-learning, which is inherently time-consuming and challenging. Moreover, as with "traditional" service-learning, institutions can encourage faculty to try interdisciplinary service-learning collaboration by rewarding such initiatives through their promotion and tenure processes. Connors et al. (1996) pointed out the importance of institutional leadership to support interdisciplinary service-learning initiatives.

Campus-based community partnership offices that provide support to faculty in developing and maintaining service-learning partnerships can help like-minded faculty from different disciplines find one another and make connections with one another. This can be done through networking events, websites, and informal matchmaking. Additionally, when such offices interact with community agencies and sites, they can try to get a broad sense of a community's needs and brainstorm about the disciplines and faculty members most appropriate to address those needs.

We believe that there is a place for and a need for interdisciplinary service-learning collaborations such as the one described in this study. Faculty interested in developing interdisciplinary service-learning collaborations are advised to start with common interests and trust; identify a community project and partner; determine roles and responsibilities and how each faculty member will work together; communicate regularly; and

actively seek out new opportunities to develop the partnership. Collaboration provided a vehicle for us to get to know one another better, to better support our students, and to make a more meaningful contribution to the community than we could have done alone. In addition, it also provided engaged scholarship and outreach that embodied the mission of our metropolitan institution.

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